

MG: Getting Down to Business

By Bob Vitrikas



MG was flying high when this iconic 'MG Girl' drawing made the cover of the April 1932 Autocar magazine.

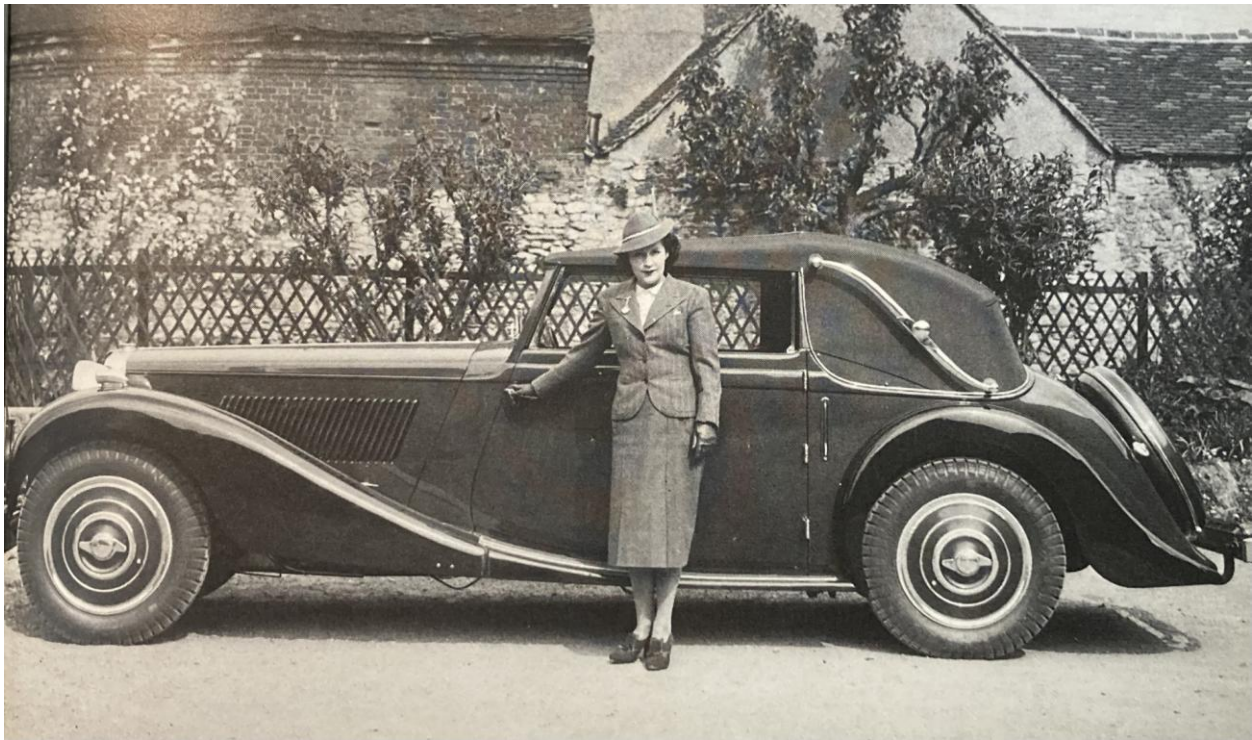
More about Cecil Kimber's untimely passing in the next installment of this series. The publicity upset William Morris, MG's overseer and revenue provider, who already had a dislike for motorsport. At the same time, Morris had hired Leonard Lord as his Production Director with orders to streamline his car manufacturing business. During Lord's first visit to Abingdon, Cecil Kimber proudly showed him MG's competition shop. Lord's reaction was not what Kimber was expecting. Lord forcefully stated, "Well that bloody lot can go for a start." From that point forward everything changed; no more factory racing specials like the mighty K3. Although the fact is that MG sold their racing models to private racers and charged them to maintain their high strung steeds at the MG factory so it wasn't a money losing proposition and gained much positive publicity for MG. Nevertheless, MG would now have to use Morris production model components, just like in the early days of the 1920s. No more high maintenance overhead cam MG specific engines, chassis and brakes. The reign of Midgets, Magnas and Magnette MGs was suddenly ended. William Morris, who had personally owned MG, sold the company in 1935 to his holding company, Morris Motors Limited. The honeymoon was over.

Last month we immersed ourselves in the Glory Days of the MG marque, racking up competition successes around the world accompanied by scores of Land Speed Records. The publicity value of these achievements was priceless, making MG the only British sports car to sell in large numbers during the 1930s. These accomplishments were fueled by MG's design innovation which was in turn driven by the boundless enthusiasm that infused the MG workforce. This spirit of innovation, and faith that the risks of competition improve the breed, ran counter to the conservative culture that characterized the larger British car companies in the 1930s.

It all came to a head in late 1934 when MG racer Kaye Don crashed while doing some pre-race testing for the Isle of Man race. His riding mechanic, Frankie Tayler, was killed and as a result Kaye Don was jailed for 10 weeks. In the dedication to his book, 'Maintaining the Breed,' John Thornley honored two men, Frankie Tayler and Cecil Kimber, with these words, "To Frankie Tayler who went out the way he would have wished (had he ever thought about it) and to Cecil Kimber who most certainly did not."

Making sports cars based on production models was nothing new to Kimber. The Midget had taught him that sports cars based on production models are simpler and

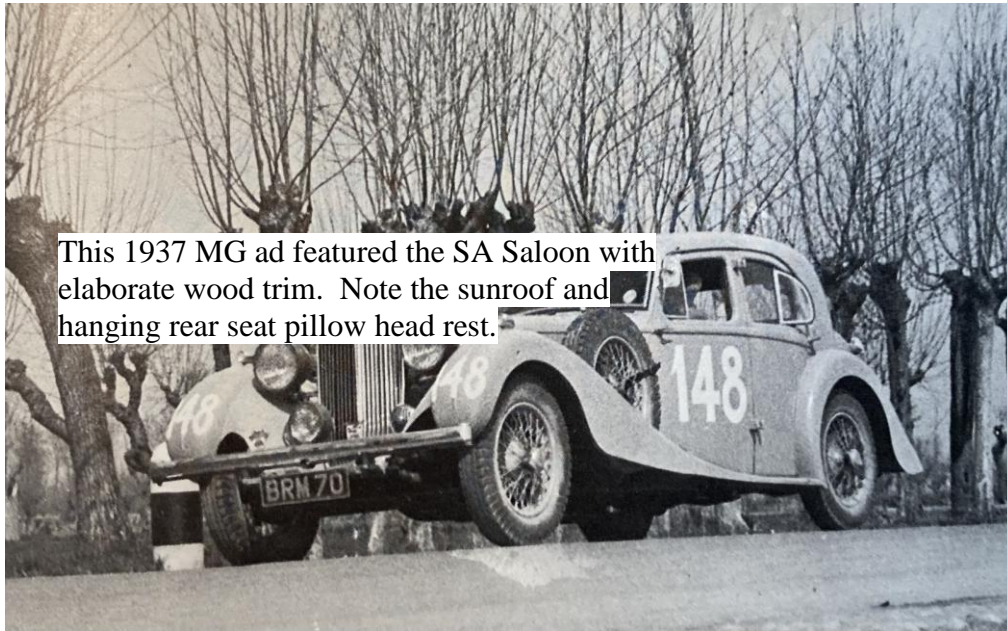
cheaper to build, using fewer parts and selling at a premium price. Style sells. Jaguar chief, William Lyons is famously quoted as saying, "It doesn't cost any more to make something pretty." And so MG realigned their products to use Morris running gear with sporty bodies made to an MG specified design. The first product of this rationalization scheme was an unlikely MG, the SA saloon. Its sleek, elegant four door enclosed body was designed by Kimber. With a wheel base an incredible three feet longer than the two seater MG sports models before it, the SA was a radical departure for MG. Under the long louvered bonnet lived a 2288 cc Wolseley Super Six straight six cylinder engine with pushrod actuated overhead valves and backed up with a four speed synchromesh gearbox. Brakes were the distrusted (at least by Kimber) hydraulic Lockheed four wheel drum brakes. Priced at 375 pounds, the SA looked to be good value compared its predecessor the much smaller in every way 1271 cc KN Magnette priced 24 pounds more.



Women drivers frequently played a key role in MG competition successes. Kay Petre, shown here with an MG SA Tickford Drophead Coupe, was one of the top drivers in the 1930s. Just 4' 10" she successfully competed in hill climbs, grand prix, rallies and record attempts around the world. She drove this MG SA in the 1938 R.A.C. Rally where it also won its class in the coachwork competition.

The SA was announced in October 1935 and the press rallied round it. 'Motor Sport' described it as "A handsome well-found car which should be ideal for fast cruising in silence and comfort.' 'The Motor' charitably described it thus, "The design is not that of a super-sporting saloon. The engine is not turned to a fine edge of performance which will call for constant attention...just the type of design to appeal to the modern sports

car enthusiast who has come to realize that speed with silence has a fascination all its own.” Not a bad start for such a complete change of design. Unfortunately 10 days earlier Bill Lyons at Jaguar has just introduced his trend setting SS 90 model which was a worthy competitor for only 10 pounds more. Worse, the massive, lumbering Morris organization took six months to get MG SA production up to full production. By that time customers, tired of waiting for their SA, switched allegiance and bought a Jaguar




This 1937 MG ad featured the SA Saloon with elaborate wood trim. Note the sunroof and hanging rear seat pillow head rest.

This MG SA was the lone British entrant in the grueling 1937 Italian Mille Miglia race. Driven by Tommy and his wife ‘Billie’ Wisdom, it was doing well until it reached Florence where it skidded out of control on the wet road and crashed. Tommy Wisdom would go on to compete in and win more Mille Miglia classes than any other British driver.

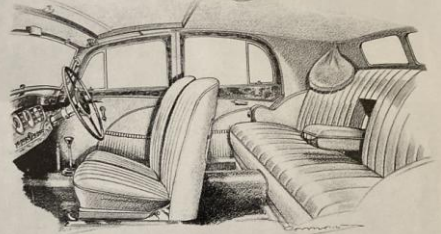
instead. Bother! Weighing a stout 3,000 pounds with just 75 hp to propel it, acceleration was no better than the five year older MG 18/80 Mark I saloon. Top speed was a useful 80 mph. Indeed the handling of the MG SA was generally regarded as superior to the Jaguar SS 90. Laurence Pomeroy, Technical Editor of ‘The Motor’ owned a Tickford Coupe SA for two years and described it, “...certainly the best car I have owned out of a considerable number, built both in England and on the Continent... For sheer pleasure in driving I have come across nothing which pleases me more.” Speaking of Jaguar, it is interesting to note that in 1937 MG advertised the SA with the slogan, “for space...for grace...for pace...” (See ad above). Ten years before Jaguar used the same terms in their advertisements.

THE TABLET




M.G. Minor Series T. Two-door £212
M.G. 1½-Litre Four-Door Saloon £315. Four-Door Open £285. Folding Head Rests £315
M.G. Two-Litre Four-Door Saloon £385. Tourer £355. Folding Head Rests £395
Prices ex works: Dangle, Triples. Buy a car made in the United Kingdom

SAFETY FIRST



for space
for grace
for pace The M.G. Two-Litre Four-Door Saloon.



THE M.G. CAR COMPANY LIMITED · BRINGDON, ON THAMES · BERKSHIRE

At about the same time as the SA production line was getting in full swing in mid 1936, a new MG Midget appeared, the TA, first of a long line of T series MGs that would define the marque. The TA offered more room than the previous Midgets with more passenger and luggage space and a larger fuel tank. The suspension was softer, brakes were hydraulic and it weighed about 100 pounds more. The weight gain was more than offset by the new 1292 cc engine producing 52.4 hp compared to its predecessor PB's 939 cc engine producing 43.3 hp. The TA's greater displacement gave it more pulling power and flexibility and the additional roominess eventually won over MG enthusiasts. The TA was available in three body styles, roadster, Airline Coupe and Tickford Drophead Coupe. Alongside the TA and a slightly improved TB, the much larger MG line of the 2.3 liter SA, 1.5 liter VA and 2.6 liter WA continued on until late 1939 when the outbreak of World War II put a stop to all automobile production.

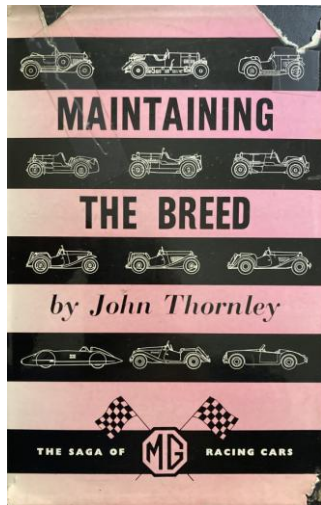


George Tuck, MG Publicity Manager and friend Beryl Goodwright, pose with a beautiful TA Tickford Drophead Coupe in George's backyard.

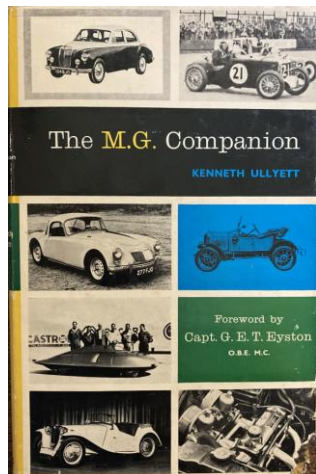
Below is a TB Roadster with blackout lights and fender flashes as England enters WWII in Sep 1939 marking the end of car production "for the duration." Per my friend Norm Ewing, the driver is Susan Tuck with Mildred Kitto as her passenger. Susan always wore stripped dresses.



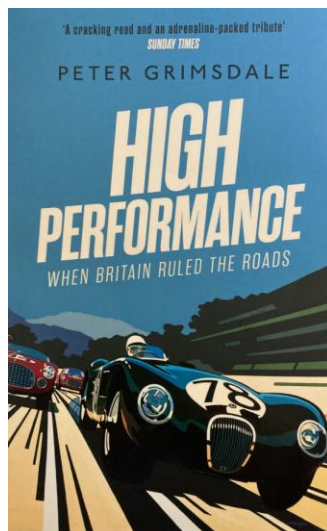
In addition to the three books I recommended in my first article in this series, may I suggest the following excellent books from which I have borrowed liberally:



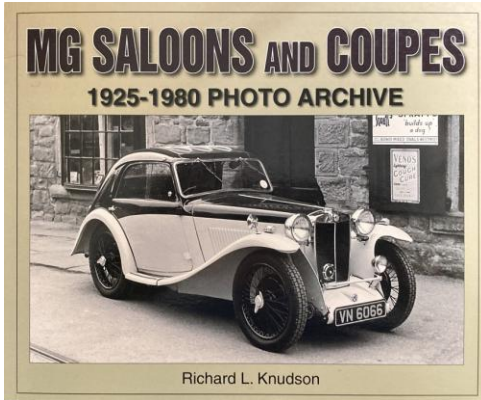
“Maintaining the Breed” by ‘Mr. MG,’ John Thornley. One of the first books on the MG, first printed in 1950. John Thornley tells the story of the MG from its earliest days right through to the MGA in the 1956 updated edition. Present at the first MG Car Club meeting in October 1930, and hired by Cecil Kimber shortly thereafter, Thornley quickly rose through the ranks to become MG’s General Manager after WWII. If one man could be credited with saving the marque after the war, it is John Thornley. His firsthand account of the development of the various MG models, especially the competition and record breaker cars, makes fascinating reading. The book is richly illustrated with photographs, engineering drawings and has several useful appendixes. This worn and tattered copy is my most cherished book, generously given to me by John from his personal library.



“The M.G. Companion” by Kenneth Ulyett is another early book on the MG, published in 1960. One of the first MG books I purchased, it too is dog eared from use. Speaking of dogs, it appears that one of ours chewed the lower right corner off the cover. Oh dear! Full of colorful anecdotes, Ulyett provides the reader insight into the men (sorry ladies, no mention of women that I could find) who were MG. About half of the book covers the development of the MGA, which had just come on the market when this book was printed.



“High Performance, When Britain Ruled the Roads” by Peter Grimsdale, is my most recent car book acquisition. Published in 2019, Grimsdale weaves the story of the British motor industry during its golden age after WWII in a way that highlights how the various personalities and their innovative cars reinforced and competed with each other during the tumultuous ‘do or die’ post war years. Grimsdale paints a brilliant, clear, and colorful picture of the cars and personalities of that glorious time. I couldn’t put it down and I’ll bet you won’t be able to either! A must read for the British car enthusiast.



“MG Saloons and Coupes” by noted MG author Richard L. Knudson presents the reader with an interesting and easy read from the origins of the MG right through to the MGB. Beautifully illustrated with hundreds of period black and white photographs. Emphasis is, as the title promises, on MG saloons and coupes. These often overlooked models are a key part of MG history and the reader will find much material to hold their interest!

Please allow me to close with a quote from the front of John Thornley’s seminal work, ‘Maintaining the Breed.’ I believe it is telling and fitting that John chose an American founding father to provide guidance for his writing. Much of John’s career success was tied to America and indeed his son, Peter Thornley, lives in the U.S..

“That is best wrote which is best adapted for obtaining the end of the writer...”

“The words used should be the most expressive that the language affords, provided that they are most generally understood - smooth, clear, and short, for the contrary qualities are displeasing.”

Benjamin Franklin
1706-1790

Amen.